

Laser eye surgery risks 'underplayed by opticians'

- Clinics give 'unsatisfactory advice' to patients, says Which?
- Eye surgery treatments cost more than advertised price

Comments (13)

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High street laser eye surgery clinics play down procedural risks to prospective customers and are pressuring them into treatment options that cost more than the advertised price, according to an undercover investigation by Which?.

More than half the UK-based clinics visited by researchers from the consumer group – including Optical Express, Optimax and Ultralase – gave unsatisfactory advice, and none of the consultations given were rated as "good" by its panel of laser eye experts.

The clinics are criticised for failing to inform customers of the level and possible duration of medical risks and complications, which can include permanently poor night vision or, in extreme cases, some loss of sight.

Almost half of Which?'s researchers were not told that even if they had the surgery they would probably need glasses when they are older. Existing dry eye problems were not taken into account in half the cases, and a branch of each of the major high street chains failed to ask the right questions to spot binocular vision.

According to Which?, around 80% of patients use the three high street chains investigated. Optimax and Optical Express both advertise surgery from £790 for both eyes, but the lowest price offered to Which? was £1,090. One Optical Express worker said: "We keep the lower prices for advertising, really."

Laser eye surgery has been available for about 20 years, but has seen huge growth recently. As well as high street clinics, surgery is also performed in independent clinics, which can be in NHS or private hospitals.

The research was carried out late last year when five undercover investigators with a range of eye conditions asked for consultations at 18 eye clinics, including some smaller chains and independent clinics. The consultations were recorded and assessed by a panel of unnamed experts (a laser eye surgeon and two clinical researchers with expertise in laser eye surgery). The panel assessed the advice given on criteria based on voluntary standards of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines.

Dr Steve Schallhorn, chief medical director of Optical Express, which claims to be "the number one provider of laser eye surgery in Europe", said he was "very disappointed" by the research, which he said was "misleading and poorly researched."

"We do hundreds of thousands of examinations and this research is based on a tiny, unscientific sample. The whole thing is predicated on their experts, but they've not disclosed who their experts were."

Russell Ambrose, chief executive of Optimax, said: "Laser treatment gives great benefits to the vast majority of patients – 99% of patients achieve driving-standard vision without the need of glasses. It is a liberating operation which myself, my wife and son have all undergone with great success